FILE ONLY

CIA trying to keep agents on the track, Gates says

By Angela Delli Santi
Staff Writer

The CIA is tightening its control over covert activities, and Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Robert M. Gates said the agency has imposed new safeguards to help prevent agents from "going off the track again."

These internal policy revisions come in the wake of the Iran-Contra affair, the covert action that resulted in secret arms shipments to Iran and diverted profits to the Nicaraguan Contras.

Mr. Gates told an overflow audience at Princeton University Wednesday that improvements in the way Congress monitors the agency will further deter CIA officials from initiating illegal policies abroad.

"When push comes to shove in Washington," he cautioned, "you can't write enough laws to prevent someone, somewhere, someday, from breaking the rules."

Mr. Gates' speech at the Woodrow Wilson School was accented by a 30-minute question-and-answer session during which he fielded inquiries on a variety of issues, most related to the Iran scandal.

Mr. Gates refuted one revelation contained in Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward's new book, questioning whether a brief hospital interview with former CIA Director William Casey actually occurred.

Mr. Casey's widow and the couple's daughter kept watch on the ailing CIA director "vitually all the time," Mr. Gates said, and Mr. Casey's room was guarded by CIA agents 24 hours a day. "Those are the facts."

In the book, "VEIL: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987," Mr. Woodward said he entered Mr. Casey's hospital room undetected. It was during the brief conversation that followed that Mr. Casey admitted his knowledge of the diversion of arms sale profits to the Nicaraguan rebels, the author contends. Mr. Casey's widow maintains that Mr. Woodward did not enter her late husband's room.

Testimony at the Iran-Contra hearings this summer produced no evidence that anyone within the CIA knew of the diversion. When asked if Mr. Casey was aware of the ploy, Mr. Gates responded, "whether Mr. Casey knew, I don't know. And, I can't do better than that."

Mr. Gates served as acting director of the CIA from December 1986 until May 1987, when a permanent replacement for Mr. Casey was named.

The prepared portion of his appearance was devoted to "The CIA and American Foreign Policy," during which he detailed the agency's role of providing intelligence information to the White House.

Despite the fact that the CIA's covert arm has gotten more than its share of press this year, Mr. Gates said only 3 percent of CIA employees are assigned to such activities. Over 95 percent of the national intelligence budget, he reported, is devoted to information collection and analysis.

In a frank and information-packed speech, Mr. Gates freely admitted that the CIA sometimes errs in its intelligence assessments. And, he labeled the United States' ability to gather overseas intelligence "sorely deficient" in some nations.

"Our capabilities are much improved in recent years, but still uneven," he said. "Some of our analyses are better than others, some intelligence officers are better than others."

Mr. Gates, who rose through the ranks of the CIA after starting as an intelligence analyst in 1966, defended the agency for its quest to provide fair, upfront intelligence reports — even when such assessments are politically unpopular with policy makers.

For example, he said CIA agents in 1980 provided detailed information on the "step-by-step imposition of martial law in Poland," and in 1986 documented electorial "cheating" in the Philippines.

In a lecture prefaced with anecdotes, Mr. Gates claimed he was risking embarrassment and humiliation by agreeing to this speaking engagement. But, then again, he said anyone who has served as long as he has probably experienced both. Many times over.

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